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ABSTRACT

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Youths' Attitudes toward the Presidency: The Relationship between Cognition and Affect

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Previous studies of youths' attitudes toward the presidency have consistently found that children's favorable views decline with age. Jaros and Kolson have proposed that this affective change results from a cognitive one--that favorability declines as youths learn more about the presidency. The present study examined the cognitive and affective components of attitudes toward the presidency held by a cross-section of 274 Memphis youths, ages 7-18. Analysis of the data revealed that, as hypothesized, adolescents exhibit greater familiarity but less affection for the presidency than children. However extended multivariate analysis of the data indicated that the cognitive and affective trends are independent, contrary to Jaros and Kolson's hypothesis.

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Youths' Attitudes toward the Presidency: The Relationship between Cognition and Affect

Michael Lupfer

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While a social attitude is often said to contain both affective and cognitive components, the relationship between the two is not well understood. In part, this is because the cognitive component is so often ignored when attitude measurement takes place. Erskine (1963) has observed that national polling organizations such as the Gallup group, while greatly concerned about the public's positive and negative evaluations of social objects, rarely assess the public's actual knowledge of the objects evaluated. Even among investigators who have included cognitive measures in their assessment of attitudes (Rosenberg, 1965; Ostrom, 1969; Kilty, 1971), there has been little agreement, either at the conceptual or operational level, as to what constitutes the cognitive component of an attitude. Indeed Katz and Stotland (1959, p. 430) have acknowledged that "the cognitive aspect can vary ... from knowledge of some minimal cue necessary to define the object to a full and detailed description of the object and beliefs about it."

Illustrative of the ambiguous relationship between

attitudinal affect and cognition is the political socialization literature, in particular the studies of attitudes toward the presidency held by American children and adolescents. Researchers have found repeatedly that children's favorable views of the presidency decline with age, the decline generally extending from highly favorable images among elementary school children to ambivalence among adolescents (Greenstein, 1965; Easton and Dennis, 1969; Sears, 1975). Investigators attempting to explain this trend have assumed, though they have not demonstrated empirically, that this affective change is associated with a cognitive one: that young people's declining idealization of the presidency is linked with their increased knowledge of the presidency as they grow older (Easton and Dennis, 1969). This assumption was recently articulated more fully by Jaros and Kolson (1974, p. 49) who asserted that "excessively positive regard for political authority is essentially an unsophisticated response characteristically exhibited by the cognitively undeveloped." As maturing youngsters are exposed to the larger social environment, however, they develop "cognitive sophistication" about political authority, so that their primitive and positive attitudes toward political authority are replaced by more sophisticated but less favorable ones. Jaros and Kolson were able

to obtain only indirect support for their cognitive sophistication hypothesis. Consequently the present investigation reevaluated their hypothesis that favorability toward the presidency declines as knowledge of the presidency increases, utilizing more direct and extensive measures than those of previous investigators.

The cognitive sophistication hypothesis asserts that youths, as they mature, evince both cognitive and affective changes in their attitudes toward the presidency and, more importantly, that cognitive changes contribute to affective changes. In testing this hypothesis, it became necessary to demonstrate, on the one hand, that cognitive and affective changes each correlate with age in the predicted direction and, on the other hand, that the cognitive-affective correlation itself persists after controlling for the variable of age. In regard to the latter, it is quite possible that affect and cognition might be statistically associated only because both are linked with age when, in fact, both represent <u>independent</u> developmental trends. Similarly the relationship between cognition and affect might be confounded by other demographic factors. After all, the race, sex and socioeconomic status of youngsters--along with their age--largely define their "political-informational environment" (Sears, 1975), i.e., the social context in which their cog-

nitions and affect about the presidency are formed and maintained. To examine the influence of these demographic factors, and to determine whether the cognitive-affective relationship is modified by these factors, a simple model was constructed (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 about here

The model assumes that the age, race, sex and socioeconomic status of youths (a) directly influence their cognitions about the presidency, (b) directly influence their affective evaluations of the presidency and also (c) indirectly influence their affective evaluations by means of influencing their cognitions. A path analysis (Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973) was performed, in order to test the model and the relationships depicted in Figure 1.

Method

Subjects

A representative sample of 274 youths was drawn from grades 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 in the schools of Memphis, Tennessee, during the period of November, 1974-April, 1975. Demographic data obtained on all subjects included age, race, sex and socioeconomic status, the last based on ratings of the parents' occupations according to Warner's Occupational Rating Scale

(Warner, Meeker and Eells, 1949). A quota sampling strategy was used to assure that subject differences in demographic characteristics were as evenly distributed as possible.

Cognitive Measures

As part of an extended interview, usually conducted at the subject's school, each youth was administered an eight-item "Presidency Quiz" to assess his/her knowledge of the institution. The questions comprising the quiz ranged in difficulty from "Who is the President now?" to "How old must a person be in order to be President?" The number of questions correctly answered provided one cognitive index, a subject's level of correct information. Another, more conventional cognitive measure resulted from the student's reply to the open-ended question, "What does the President do?" The number of presidential duties and functions (e.g., "He leads the country," "He proposes laws," "He visits other countries") enumerated by each subject, without regard for the precise accuracy of the description, provided a second cognitive measure.

Affective Measures

Four different measures of youths' affective evaluations of the presidency were obtained during the interview. (a) The Affection subscale (Arterton, 1975; Lupfer and Kenny, 1976) of the Easton-Dennis scale (1969)--a commonly

used, six-point rating instrument for assessing youngsters' feelings about the presidency--provided a direct, forced-choice measure. (b) Subjects' responses to the open-ended question, "What does the President do?" were rescored according to whether they described the President's activities as benevolent ("He makes peace"), neutral ("Talks to lots of people") or malevolent ("He could send us back to Africa"). (c) The direct and open-ended inquiry "What is the President like? What sort of person is he?" was coded according to whether the youths attributed only positive traits to the President; neutral, mixed or no traits to the President; or only negative traits to the President. Finally (d) a semi-projective measure of affect was derived from youths' completions of a story developed by Greenstein (1975) which began: "One day the President was driving his car to a meeting. Because he was late, he was driving very fast. The police stopped the car. Now finish ..." Youths' evaluations of the President were categorized as either positive, neutral-mixed, or negative.

Results

The cognitive sophistication hypothesis was first evaluated by deriving a canonical correlation between the set of two cognitive measures and the set of four affective measures. A coefficient of .27 ($p < .001$) resulted, pro-

viding modest but statistically significant support for the hypothesis that increased knowledge of the presidency is linked with less favorable evaluations of the office. Note the two canonical variates in Table 1, i.e., the linear com-

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Insert Table 1 about here

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bination of cognitive measures and their coefficients, and the linear combination of affective measures and their coefficients upon which the canonical correlation was based. Both canonical variates are defined primarily by the most "objective" of the several measures, the Presidency Quiz having a loading of 1.04 on the cognitive canonical variate and the Affection subscale having a loading of .92 on the affective canonical variate. These two canonical variates served as the composite cognitive and affective indices in subsequent analyses.

Both cognitive and affective changes correlated with age as predicted. Among older youths, more knowledge of the presidency was found, the correlation between age and cognition being .53 ($p < .001$). Adolescents were also less likely than children to regard the presidency with unqualified affection, the correlation between age and affect being .37 ($p < .001$).

As noted earlier, a more stringent test of the cognitive

sophistication hypothesis required that the cognitive-affective correlation persist after controlling for the influence of the demographic variables of age, race, sex and socio-economic status. Two multiple regression analyses, dictated by path analysis, were performed. The results appear in Table 2. Most noteworthy was the disappearance of a signi-

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Insert Table 2 about here

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ficant correlation between cognition and affect, the coefficient dropping from .27 to .06 ($p > .20$) after extracting the effect of the demographic variables. Consequently, support for the cognitive sophistication hypothesis no longer existed, the evidence suggesting instead that maturing youths' increasing knowledge of the presidency and their decreasing affection for the office develop independently.

The regression analyses in Table 2 reaffirmed Sears' (1975) contention that a child's age is the most reliable predictor of his/her cognitions and feelings about the presidency. In addition, the analyses suggested that accurate knowledge of the presidency is not only more common among older youths, but also among youths from upper-income families and, to a lesser extent, among males. On the basis of regression analysis, the model presented in Figure 1 was revised and the resulting path diagram is shown in Figure 2.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Discussion

Consistent with most investigations of young peoples' attitudes toward political authority, the present study found that adolescents view the presidency less favorably than do children. Moreover this study provided convincing documentation for the assumption that older youths' cognitions (knowledge) about the presidency are more accurate and extensive than children's cognitions. The present evidence, however, does not support Jaros and Kolson's hypothesis that the two trends are directly linked, suggesting rather that the trends develop independently. Only because both trends become increasingly apparent with age does it appear that they are associated.

This investigation was initiated, not only to reevaluate the cognitive sophistication hypothesis, but also to reaffirm the importance of examining the relationship between attitudinal affect and cognition. McGuire (1969, p. 157), in his estimable review of the literature on attitudes, concluded that the two components had "proven to be so highly intercorrelated that theorists who insist on distinguishing them should bear the burden of proving that the

distinction is worth making." If the absence of a reliable association between cognition and affect qualifies as sufficient proof, then this study has demonstrated that the distinction is worth making.

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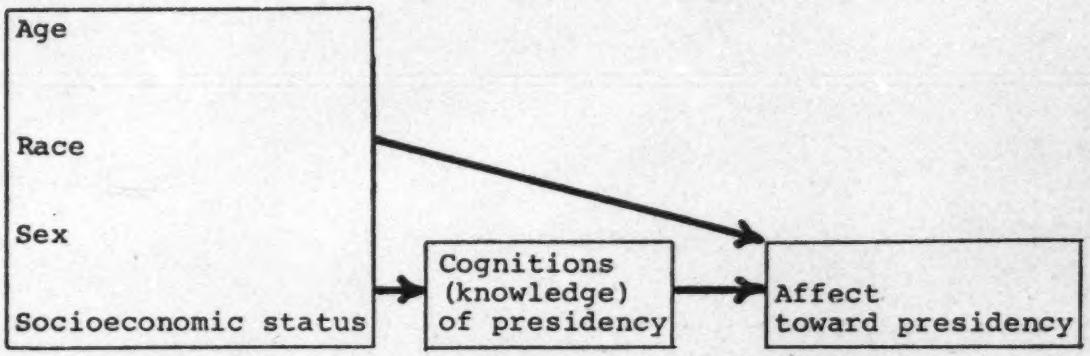

Figure 1. Model depicting paths connecting demographic variables, cognitions of the presidency, and affect toward the presidency

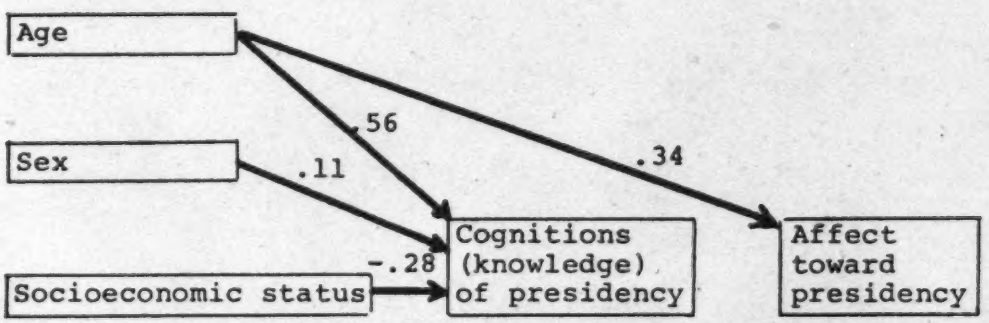

Figure 2. Revised path diagram based on regression analyses. Indices indicate significant path coefficients (beta weights).

Table 1

Two Canonical Variates Formed to Derive Canonical Correlation

Measure	Range of scores	Loading on variate
Cognitive Canonical Variate		
Presidency Quiz: number of questions answered correctly	0 to 8	1.04
What does President do: number of presidential functions named	0 to 6	-0.29
Affective Canonical Variate		
Affection subscale	Factor scores, with high score indicating negative evaluation	0.92
What does President do: type of functions described	1(Benevolent) to 3(Malevolence)	0.26
What is President like: traits attributed	1(Positive) to 3(Negative)	-0.01
President-police episode: evaluation of President	1(Positive) to 3(Negative)	-0.21

Table 2

Multiple Regression Analyses of Cognitive and Affective Canonical Variates

Predictor Variables	Range of Scores	Criterion: Cognitive Canonical Variate		Criterion: Affective Canonical Variate	
		Beta	t	Beta	t
Demographic Variables:					
Age	7 to 18	.56	11.04***	.34	4.73***
Race	1(B) to 2(W)	.08	1.55	.07	1.15
Sex	1(F) to 2(M)	.11	2.22*	.03	0.52
Socioeconomic status	1(H) to 7(L)	-.28	5.25***	-.08	1.14
Cognitive canonical variate	-3.0 to 3.0	not included		.06	0.86
Multiple R		.61***		.39***	

***$p < .001$

*$p < .05$